

**A BRIEF SURVEY**  
**ON**  
**CHHAU DANCE**  
**OF**  
**DHENKANAL**

**ORISSA SANGEET NATAK AKADEMI**

**MUSEUM BUILDING, BHUBANESWAR**



*( Kaliya Dalan )*

## Introduction ..

Orissa, is not only very rich in ancient Sculpture, temple-arts and literature, but also a rich repository of numerous histrionic arts. Due to lack of publicity, most of the indigenous art forms are not known to the out side world. Orissa Sangeet Natak Akademi, had therefore planned to bring-out brochures and monographs on various forms of dance, dramatics and music in English in order to project these forms to out siders.

This brochure on Chhau Dance of Dhenkanal, is the first amongst the series. The other brochures which will be brought out shortly are, Dandanata of Orissa, Puppetry in Orissa, Prahlad Natak, Bharat Lila, Bandi Nata, Desia Nata etc.

Chhau Dance of Orissa has a rich tradition and beside the Seraikela Chhau, and the Mayurbhanj Chhau of today, Chhau Dances were very popular in Dhenkanal, Talcher, Bonai, Keonjhar and Nilgiri. The present study of Chhau Dance of Dhenkanal not only reveals the martial heritage of the dancers, it also provides the back ground materials for a comparative study of the different forms of Chhau Dances existing in the country to-day.

I hope, this booklet will be of interest to dance lovers and dance critics.

Justice Harihar Mohapatra

President

Orissa Sangeet Natak Akademi.

It is a matter of great pleasure for us that the Orissa Sangeet Natak Akademi is bringing out a monograph on "Dhenkanal Chhau". During February 1979, a Chhau show was organised by the Akademi at village Jhumpudia of Dhenkanal, wherein veteran Chhau artists of Dhenkanal appeared for the first time after a lapse of about 40 years. This special show was presided over by Professor Prana Bandhu Kar, Vice-President of the Akademi and people; men, women and children, from nearby villages thronged the place in thousands to witness the show in spite of very inclement weather.

2. The show could be organised with the generous assistance and cooperation of Shri K. P. Singh Deo, Member of Parliament, Shri Basant Kumar Mohapatra, Shri Ballav Mohapatra, Shri Ramesh Chandra Dhal, Shri Haladhar Mishra, Shri Joginath Das, Shri Bijoy Singh and Shri Braja Kishore Dhal and the villagers of Chandrasekhar Prasad. We are also extremely grateful to the Block Development Officer, Additional District Magistrate, Dhenkanal for their help and cooperation.

3. The Chhau Dance of Dhenkanal has distinctive identification and flavour. This particular form of dance which had earned great fame before the merger of the States, is now in a moribund state. The characteristic feature of this Chhau dance of Dhenkanal is that all the participants belong to the traditional Paika families. After a lot of efforts by the Akademi, this form is gradually being revived. We have no doubt in our mind that a part from conservation of this valuable form, its revival would also be taken up by the local populace

4. Chhau Dance is also seen in the former ex-states of Bonai, Keonjhar and Nilagiri, besides Mayurbhanj which has earned world wide fame. The Akademi has a scheme of covering these Chhau forms prevalent at different places and to bringout a comprehensive study of them with a view to bringing out their points of similarity and also of their differences, if any. It has taken up a scheme of Codification of Chhau dance of Mayurbhanj to be subsequently linked up with the Chhau Dance prevalent not only at Dhenkanal but also at Nilagiri Keonjhar and Bonai.

5. We sincerely hope that our efforts in publication of a monograph on the Chhau dance of Dhenkanal would be the beginning of the revival of the form and also of its conservation.

Raicharan Das  
Secretary, Akademies



*The blind drummer Shri Mohan Nayak  
& drummer Shri Rajan Nayak*

## Chhau Dance of Dhenkanal

Dance, Music and Dramatics, for Orissa, is as old as its history. Numerous forms of histrionic arts which are deeply and intimately associated with the life of the people, were evolved, nurtured and put into practice and then left to the posterity either to retain or to forget. Many forms, thus, must have perished away through the passage of time. Proper patronage helps the up-keep of Art forms at all times.

Chhau dance is basically a virile dance which demonstrates vim and vigour. It reflects a culture of strength with aesthetics.

In ancient times, the infantry was the main protective force of a State. When this country was ruled by multiple feudatory rulers, the hitch over their boundaries was the main issue over which constant vigilance was kept. The infantry men were known as Paikas (Padatikas). These Paikas did not form the regular army. Cultivators by profession, they received land-grants for their

maintenance and kept up their rigorous practice of warfare by regular physical exercises and rehearsals of battle scenes—always ready to rise for any sudden occasion. These martial practices with musical accompaniments of war-drums and cries also offered entertainment for one and all during times of peace, religious ceremonies and social occasions.

From themes of war to themes of fantasy and mythology, the transformation of Paika dances into a regular dance-form, the Chhau Dance was ofcourse a matter of innovation and the result was manifold. As years passed-by with no real battles to fight and companies disbanded, these institutions turned to remain institutions of art for art-sake.

On the wake of Independence and at the end of feudatory system, the royal patronage automatically came to a halt and institutions pursuing these arts had to dwindle away.

In the post independant era, after the state's merger, Seraikala was cut off from Orissa and it was only the Chhau dance of Mayurbhanj which remained to be known and popular because of the patronisation it received, however meagre, from many quarters. But even till today besides the district of Mayurbhanj, Chhau dance still exists in other places as well, such as Keonjhar, Bonai, Nilgiri, Talcher and Dhenkanal. Due to lack of patronisation these institutions have dwindled and its faint existence is traceable only during the rituals at festivals such as Dusserah and Chaitra Parba.



*Waiting for an attack in "War Dance"*

The Chhau Dance of Dhenkanal has till today retains traces of its glory and sophistication. Though it is of the same mask-less pattern as that of the present Chhau-dance of Mayurbhanj, it has retained its distinct indentifications and peculiarities in its stylisation, choreography and its repertoire.

While the Princes and the Royal families are the participants in the Seraikela Chhau and the commoners in the Mayurbhanj Chhau teams, it has remained with the traditional Paikas of Dhenkanal, whose ancestors themselves formed the infantry-men of the Dhenkanal Kings, before the merger of the States.

The martial traditions of the Paikas of Dhenkanal occupy a very important place in the history of Orissa.

The detailed descriptions of the real battles they fought, which took place between the Maratha army of Rajaram and the army of Dhenkanal's King Bira Trilochana Mahindra Bahadur in 1779 and how the Maratha army

was defeated have been recorded in the famous book "Samara Taranga" by the great poet Brajanath Bada Jena (1730-1795) of Dhenkanal. Amongst the Oriya literature on war, this book therefore stands unique and the foremost. As Mr. W. W. Hunter puts it in his History of Orissa (vol. II, page 104 to 111). "As Dhenkanal is the most civilised, so Mayurbhanj or the peacock country is the largest of the tributary States".

Culture flourished with patronisation of the state and no wonder the militant Paikas of Dhenkanal nourished a beautiful institution of Chhau Dance.

Before the year 1890, amongst the numerous Paika villages of Dhenkanal, two villages namely Balarampur and Chandra Sekhar Prasad had become very prominent for their Chhau Dances in their Paika Akhadas. By then Chhau Dance was also very famous at Bonai state from which royalty, the mother of Raja Sura Pratap of Dhenkanal hailed. It is therefore assumed that there was some exchange of culture between Bonai and Dhenkanal. It was during the rule of Maharaj Sura Pratap Mahindra Bahadur, that these institutions got the real boost they deserved. Chhau dances became regular annual features at the Dhenkanal palace premises. The King, in order to encourage the art and the artists gave monetary grants for purchase of costumes and musical instruments and conferred special titles on the Gurus and the artists.



The following artists had received titles from Maharaj Sura Pratap Singh Mahindra Bahadur.

- (1) Ustad Bhagawat Sardar Singh—Leader
- (2) Sudarsan Champet Singh
- (3) Kunja Gajaraj Singh
- (4) Balaram Sardar Singh
- (5) Krushna Fate Singh
- (6) Gangadhar Daulat Singh
- (7) Banamali Dala Singhara
- (8) Baidhara Pahad Singh
- (9) Madhusudan Gajaraj Singh



In 1902, Raja Sura Pratap Mahindra Bahadur married in the royal family of Seraikela and to the Chhau Dance of Dhenkanal, it was an added advantage because Seraikela was also then very famous for its masked Chhau Dance.

*The valiant old veteran Paika—ready to charge*

Though Chhau Dance of Dhenkanal never had the masks, nor adopted the pattern it enriched its repertoire by adding other technicalities such as music & costuming. Chhau Dance had become an item of "Must" in all state functions. Regular performances were conducted at the palace of Dhenkanal during the month of Chaitra after the Dola Jatra in the presence of the royal gathering and V.I.Ps. Ustad Bhagawat Sardar Singh of Jhumpudia village earned a reputation as a great Guru of Chhau Dance. The king wanted to make this Chhau Dance a prestige for the state.

Late Narayan Chandra Pal was appointed as the Band-Master and an Ustad namely Raghunath Singh from Mayurbhanj had also joined the team.

In 1916, a Chhau Dance competition was held at Cuttack in aid of War-fund where Chhau teams of both Mayurbhanj and Dhenkanal had participated. The impressario of the Dhenkanal Chhau was Chandrasekhar Pani and it is reported that the Dhenkanal Chhau team won the medal.

It was after this event, Ustad Raghunath Singh went to Mayurbhanj. King Sura Pratap died in the year 1918 and the state was brought under the court of wards by the British government. Narayan Chandra Pal also left the party and went back to Mayurbhanj.

There was a dull moment for Dhenkanal Chhau during this period. Although feverish activities continued, the Chhau dance of Dhenkanal had to wait for its restoration until the year 1925 when Maharaj Shankar Pratap occupied the throne. To the good fortune for all,

Shankar Pratap also got married in the royal family of Seraikela which event again helped the promotion of Dhenkanal Chhau.

A real connoisseur of art and discipline, Shankar Pratap did his best to bring back the Chhau dance of Dhenkanal to the lime-light again. He established the palace programmes of Chhau with added glamour. He deputed the following Gurus and artists to Seraikela for a refresher training.

- (1) Bula Ranjan Singh
- (2) Shri Lingaraj Mohapatra
- (3) Shri Ballav Mohapatra
- (4) Dhruba Charan Bhuyan
- (5) Nath Naik (Drummer)



*A Scene from the "War Dance"*

Shri Ballav Mohapatra and Shri Lingaraj Mohapatra are alive. Though at a very old age, it is a feast for the eyes to see these old m estros demonstrating. Although physically with

run-down muscles, these masters spring-up on their toes as the drums beat. Shankar Pratap presented awards, medals and titles to the artists. The following were the recipients of titles by Shankar Pratap.

- |                                |                              |
|--------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1. Shri Madan Uday Singh       | 5. Shri Bir Maharaj Singh    |
| 2. Shri Bimbadhar Subahu Singh | 6. Shri Naga Subuddhi        |
| 3. Shri Jambeswar Fate-Singh   | 7. Shri Upendra Daulat Singh |
| 4. Shri Guntha Kautuka Singh   |                              |

Shankar Pratap went further. He granted freedom from forced labour for the participants of the Chhau Dance. In his palace circular of 26-4-1927, he ordered thus :

“Office of the Private Secretary to the Raja and Ruling Chief of Dhenkanal

(Feudatory State) M.O No. 2430C, the Palace, Dhenkanal, Date 26-4-1927 (Seal) The Sarbarakar of Chandra Sekhar Prasad is hereby directed that he should in no occasion ask the players of Chhau Party to render bethi so long as they are actually in party”.

Sd/-R. M. Pattnaik

“Officiating Private Secretary”

( Courtesy Shri Braja Kishore Dhal, Article entitled  
‘Naara Kanthatola, Chhau Nata’ Published in Pragativadi  
15th December 1976)



*A Scene from the "War Dance"*

Thus, with adequate royal patronage, the fame of the Chhau Dance of Dhenkanal spread far and wide.

The colourful repertory of the Chhau Dance of Dhenkanal consist of the following items :—

- (A) Solo items
- (B) Duet items
- (C) Items with four artists
- (D) Group items
- and (E) The war dance.

(A) Solo Items :-  
(Janakia Nacha)

- i) Janakia Paika—(One soldier) or the Ramshek Phoot
- ii) Abhimanyu Phoot
- iii) Ranga Panda Phoot
- iv) Prajapati Nacha (The Butterfly dance)

(B) Duet items :-  
(Jodi Nacha)

- i) Jodi Paika (Two Soldiers) and some others

(C) Items with four artists :  
(Chari Jania Nacha)

- i) Chari Paika (Four Soldiers) and some others

(D) Group items  
(Dala Nacha)

- 1) Ravana Badha
- 2) Gouri Puja
- 3) Mahisasura Badha
- 4) Pramila Juddhha
- 5) Shikari Saheb
- 6) Rushya Shrunga
- 7) Bhuta Keli
- 8) Nithura Kalia

- 9) Sudarshan Chakra
- 10) Abhimanyu Badha
- 11) Kala Chakra
- 12) Rahasa Lila
- 13) Labakusa Juddha
- 14) Madan Bhashma
- 15) Dhanubhanga
- 16) Kaliya Dalana
- 17) Tambodia Krushna

and many other such items.

- (E) War Dance :  
(Juddhha Nacha)



*The Youngsters learning the art of "Chali" at the Jatra Padia of Chandra Sekhar Prasad—the thatched hut in the back ground is used as the waiting room for the artists.*

### **Musical Instruments :**

The main accompanying musical instruments are the Dhol (the drums) and the Mohuri (the blowing instrument like Shehnai). These two are the absolute necessities. The other instruments which are also used are the Bada Baja (the big drum) the Turi and Kahali (Like clarion and trumpet without reed) and the Jhanja (Brass Alloy Cymbals) etc.

No songs are sung in Chhau of Dhenkanal but the music is based on traditional tunes of Odissi Songs-the Chhandas and the Champus etc.

### **The Presentation :**

The style of presentation of the Chhau Dance of Dhenkanal is unsophisticated and is in the typical common Jatra style of Orissa except the central raised platform.

A field known as the Jatra Padia is the place of performance. The spectators sit around this open arena. By the side of the field, there is a room where the artists wait. The make-up and the costuming is done at another place away from the field. After make-up, all artists gather for an invocatory Puja at the village goddess Mangala, located at the village cross-road. After the Puja, all the artists walk in a ceremonial procession along with the musical accompaniment of Dhol, Mohuri and come to their waiting room through the spectators. The music hands take their position at one side of the arena, with the spectators.





*The Prajapati Nrutya*

dance numbers. In between the items the drummers take to their toes and demonstrate various style of drum beatings.

The performance begins with the drummer demonstrating his skill on the instruments. Sometimes he dances with the drum reciting the "Bols" loudly. After this initial, there follows a demonstration of the Chalis (Styles of walking). Artists come out from the waiting room together and after few rounds in the field, go back to the room. Then follows the individual

The final item is invariably the "war dance" where the skill of warfare is demonstrated.

This Chhau Dance of Dhenkanal, as it has been, cannot be performed in a modern theatre hall having one side spectators. The style of performance even for a Solo dance demands an open arena with spectators on all side.

There is absolutely no scope for giving any scenic arrangements at the back-ground. The properties are handed over to the artists in view of everybody. Costumes are re-arranged in the knowledge of all. Properties like that of a tall stool and the "Serpent cut-out" are brought into the arena by the boys and kept in place in broad light, without any cover. On the whole, the atmosphere in a performance of Chhau Dance of Dhenkanal is absolutely cordial with full of spectators participation.

There is a short description on the Chhau Dance of Dhenkanal in the Oriya Book "Dhenkanal Itihas" (History of Dhenkanal) written by Shri Ramachandra Nanda Bhakti Binod (Published in 1929). While describing on Late Maharaj Sura Pratap (during 1908-9) in page A 21, the record says.

"During his period, the Chhau Nata of two villages, Chandrasekhar Prasad and Balarampur was an unique spectacle. During the month of Chaitra or before the Maha Visuba Sankranti (Pana Sankranti) the performances are held and ends on that day. But the preparations for teaching and training of these start from Dusserah time in the village Akhadas."

“The speciality of Chhau Dance is this that there is no verbal use. It means that there is no speech making and singing etc., in the Chhau Nata as done in the performance of Jattras such as Rama lila, Krushna lila and Prahasana. But the other requirements such as the costumes, make-up etc, are fully utilised.”

“Mythological themes such as Ravana Badha, Kumbhakarna Badha, Indrajita Badha, and Braja Lila, Mathura Lila are performed and just in these, they use royal costumes, bangles, and weapons like bows, and arrows etc.”

“They have also characters like monkey, bear etc., in the Chhau Nata as they have in “Suangas”.

“The artists, after their make-up and costumes stay in a place covered with screens. During the time of the show, they come out to the arena from this place and put up their performances.”

“In this dance form the limbs of the body such as the hands, feet, waist, shoulders and head are vigorously utilised as in a gymnastics.”

“In our country the body gesture is known as ‘Chhai’. It is therefore assumed that because a lot of body gestures (Chhai or Chhabi) are done to perform this dance, it is known as “Chhai Nata” or “Chhau Nata”.

### **“Origin of the word Chhau”**

The above record also indicates the origin of the word “Chhau” according to the experts of Dhenkanal. This definition, in a way is almost similar to the theory given for the Seraikela Chhau or the Mayurbhanj Chhau except of the fact that in Seraikela, they connect the word “Chhai” to “Chhaya” meaning shadow to be linked with the facial Masks they use. The other point of view expressed by the experts on Mayurbhanj Chhau is that the word “Chhau” is an abbreviation of the word “Chhauni” meaning a military camp where probably the “Chhau” dance had originated, would hold more good and appropriate to the Chhau dance of Dhenkanal, whose artists hail only from the traditional families of Paikas of Dhenkanal.

### **The Technique.**

In a broad sense, the techniques of the Chhau Dance of Dhenkanal can be termed unique. As regards the music and the repertory, Chhau dance of Dhenkanal, would in a way, appear more similar to the Chhau Dance of Seraikela except the masks. No rituals are attached to Chhau dances Dhenkanal. As regards its training, it is purely the physical exercises adopted for the Paikali gymnastics. There is no female participation.

Suitable candidates first practise the “Bura Lahan”, for the fitness and suppleness of their body. The next phases of exercise consist of various styles of Chalis or gaits.

While both Seraikela and Mayurbhanja styles specify six types of Chalis, Topkas, the Dhenkanal Chhau adopts mainly the following four types.

- |                   |                          |
|-------------------|--------------------------|
| (1) Salakha Chali | —The straight walk       |
| (2) Babu Chali    | —The gait of an official |
| (3) Karua Chali   | —The side-wise walk      |
| (4) Baga Tobka    | —The stalk of a crane    |

Besides the above, they also adopt imitations of birds and animals of various kinds.

Similarly, while both Seraikela and Mayurbhanj Chhau specify 36 types of Uflis or Upalayas ( the movements of the body, limb and foot work with leap and motion) the Chhau Dance of Dhenkanal specifies only 20 Uflis.

They are as under :

- |                    |                  |
|--------------------|------------------|
| (1) Sindura Tipa   | (5) Phank        |
| (2) Jhuntia Baja   | (6) Kara Bhaanra |
| (3) Uda            | (7) Bula Udana   |
| (4) Sindura Pochha | (8) Bagha Dian   |

- (9) Chheli Dian
  - (10) Babaji Basa
  - (11) Paniki Pata
  - (12) Sara Hana
  - (13) Tipa Sungha
  - (14) Mankada Chit
  - (15) Langala Siaria
  - (16) Annthu Bhanga
  - (17) Tipa Dala
  - (18) Kara Bhanga
  - (19) Kara Basa
  - (20) Goda Bhanga Tipa
- Ufuli.



*(The Butter-fly dance)*

(There may be more names, but since all old experts are dead, only the above list could be obtained )

Out of these Uflis, except for Sindura Tipa ( Seraikela—Sindura Tika and Mayurbhanja—Sindura Pindha ), Jhuntia Baja (Seraikela & Mayurbhanj—Jhuntia Maja) Chheli Dian (Mayurbhanj Chheli Dian, Seraikela Chheli Denga) Sarahana (Seraikela Pasara Hana & Pranam & Mankada



merger of states, this beautiful Chhau Dance of Dhenkanal, has almost turned defunct without any patronisation. Except a very few, all Ustads have left this world. There may not be any with direct knowledge of this school of dancing after another few years.

While much work remains to be done for a regular revival of this institution, Orissa Sangeet Natak Akademi is thankful to Shri Kamakshya Prasad Singh Deo Mahindra Bahadur of Dhenkanal, who brought to our notice, this beautiful dance form “the Chhau of Dhenkanal”.

DHIREN DASH

“CHHAU DANCE OF DHENKANAL”

*Published by*—ORISSA SANGEET NATAK AKADEMI, BHUBANESWAR